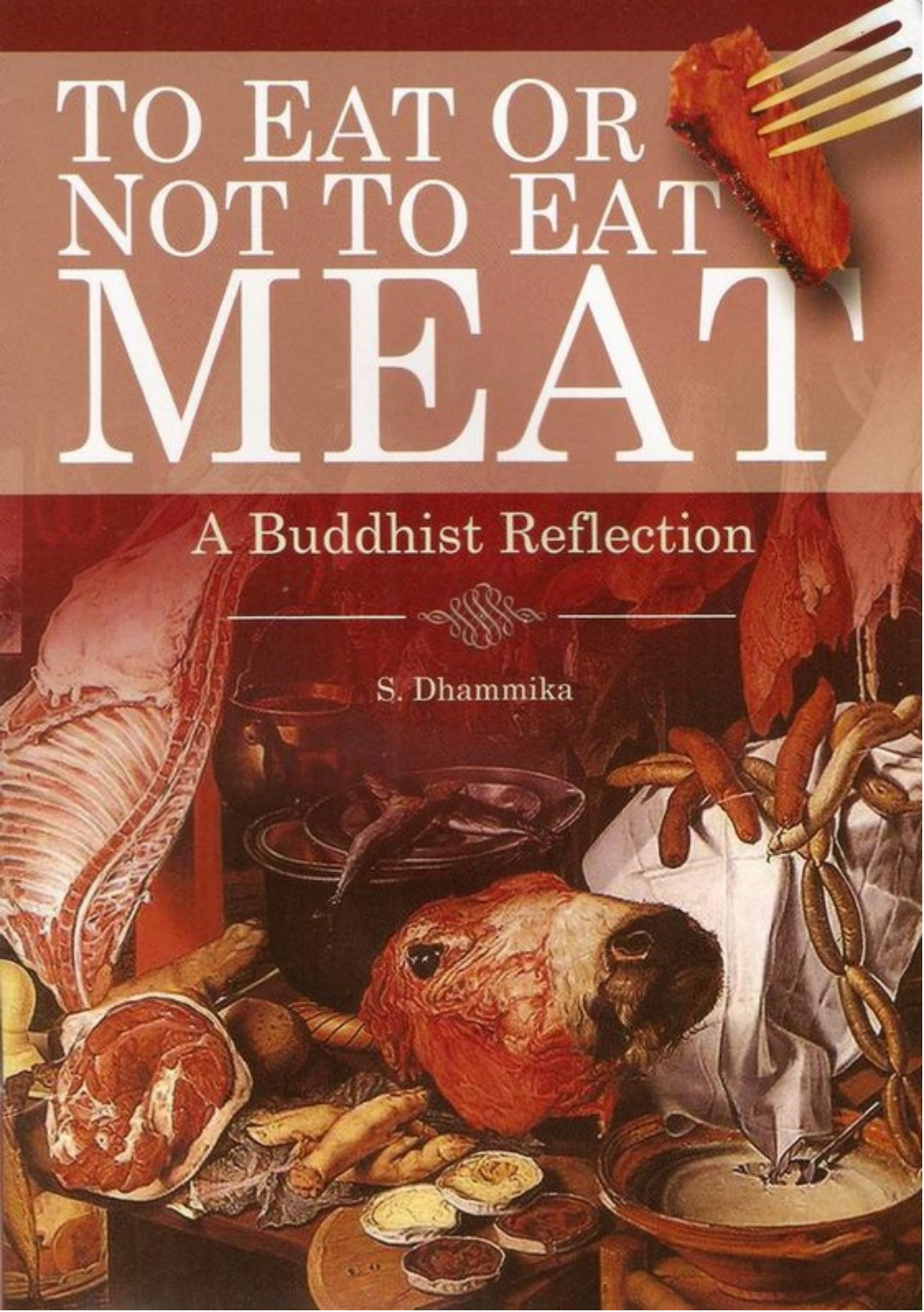


TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT MEAT

A Buddhist Reflection

S. Dhammika



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A BUDDHIST REFLECTION
S. DHAMMIKA

BUDDHA DHAMMA MANDALA SOCIETY
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CONTENTS



Vegetarianism In Ancient India
1

Buddhist Arguments for Vegetarianism
5

Motivation And Meat
9

The Last Link In The Chain
11

The Problematic Vegetarian
13

Meat In The Buddhist Tradition
15

How I Became a Vegetarian
19

VEGETARIANISM IN ANCIENT INDIA



Vegetarianism is the practice of having a meat-free diet. There are different types of vegetarianism, e.g. lacto-vegetarians will eat dairy products but not eggs, and vegans will eat no products derived from animals. The first evidence for any type of vegetarianism comes from ancient Greece and India. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras (570-495 BCE) advocated vegetarianism and at around the same time in India, Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, was also advocating vegetarianism. Despite popular perceptions to the contrary, the Buddha, a younger contemporary of Mahavira, was not a vegetarian and did not explicitly insist on its practice in any of his teachings.

Many arguments are used to support vegetarianism – the health argument (a meat diet causes various diseases), the biological argument (humans are not naturally carnivorous), the economic argument (animal husbandry is an inefficient form of food production), and the humane argument (eating meat requires killing animals which is cruel). Some of these arguments are rather weak, others less so. But from the point of view of Buddhist ethics the only one of these arguments that has to be considered is the last one. Does the Pali Tipitaka, the earliest record of the Buddha's teachings, contain anything suggesting that Buddhists should be vegetarian?

There is no place in either the Sutta, the Vinaya or the Abhidhamma Pitakas where the Buddha says his disciples, monastic or lay, should avoid eating meat. Supporters of Buddhist vegetarianism like Philip Kapleau Roshi (*To Cherish All Life*, 1986) have claimed that the Buddha did teach vegetarianism but that all references to it were deleted from the sacred scriptures by meat-loving monks in later centuries. There is no evidence whatsoever of this having been done and this argument can be dismissed out of hand.

There are several places in the scriptures where the Buddha is described as having eaten meat. Anguttara Nikaya III,49 mentions that the Buddha was once served *sukara mamsa* with jujube fruit. This term can be translated with certainty as *sukara* = pig, *mamsa* = meat or flesh. In another place it distinctly says that a man sent his servant to the market to buy meat so it could be prepared and offered to the Buddha (Anguttara Nikaya IV,187). Yet another text mentions in passing that a group of people "boiled porridge and rice, made soup and minced meat" (*mamsani kottenti*) while preparing a feast for the Buddha and his monks (Vinaya I, 239). Once some men slaughtered a cow, cooked it and then one of them gave "the best cuts of the cooked meat" (*mamse pakke varamamsani*) to a nun who subsequently offered it to the

Buddha (Vinaya III,208). It is important to point out that the Tipitaka very rarely mentions anything the Buddha ate, this not being its purpose.

One of the criticisms the Jains directed towards the Buddha was that he ate meat. “Many Jains went through the town, through the main roads and side streets, the alleys and the lanes, waving their arms and shouting, ‘The general Siha has this very day slaughtered a large creature to feed it to the monk Gotama and he is going to eat it knowing that it was slaughtered specifically for him.’” (Anguttara Nikaya IV,187). In this incident the Jains were trying to discredit or embarrass the Buddha for eating meat, which suggests that there was a feeling in India at the time that monks at least should be vegetarian. But this idea could have only been in its infancy because the Buddha became widely respected despite the criticism of him by the Jains on this issue. And he was not the only one. We read of a particular ascetic who was highly esteemed by the people of Vesali despite having taken a vow to consume only meat and alcohol (Digha Nikaya III,9).

There are several places in the Vinaya, the rules for Buddhist monks and nuns, where eating meat is mentioned or implied, for example where it says particular types of meat such as lion, snake, hyena, should not be consumed, implying that other types can be (Vinaya I,218-8). It also recommends meat broth as a medicine (Vinaya I,206). In the section on medicine in the Vinaya it says that monks are allowed to take the oil, fat and tallow of fish, crocodiles, pigs, bears and other animals for medicinal reasons (Vinaya I,200).

However, it would seem that the first evidence for Buddhist vegetarianism also comes from the Vinaya. Most scholars agree that much of the Vinaya dates from some time after the Buddha so some of the things it says may not necessarily reflect what was believed or done during his time. In the Vinaya, Devadatta is said to have demanded that vegetarianism be made compulsory for monks and nuns. “For as long as life lasts, let them not eat fish or meat (*maccha mamsam*). Whoever does so would be stained by a fault.” (Vinaya II,197). Devadatta is always depicted in Buddhist literature as a villain. This story suggests that within perhaps a century of the Buddha’s passing there was a strong movement in the Sangha for vegetarianism but a stronger one against it.

After this the next evidence of a Buddhist move towards vegetarianism comes from the edicts of the great Buddhist emperor Asoka Maurya. In an edict issued in 257 BCE he said, “Formerly, in the kitchen of the king, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer, are killed and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed.” This edict reflects well the early Buddhist attitude to vegetarianism – it is a good thing, so we cut down our consumption of meat and in time we’ll get around to phasing it out. Later, in 243 BCE Asoka issued another edict banning the slaughter, branding, castrating of domestic animals on certain days of each month. In this same edict he also announced a ban on the hunting of certain wild animals and the setting up of forest reserves where no

hunting was to be allowed. After this we get no evidence of Buddhist vegetarianism for several centuries.

It is commonly assumed that early Buddhism did not teach vegetarianism while Mahayana did. However, this is a perception that needs to be examined more closely. Of the hundreds of Mahayana sutras only a very small number discuss vegetarianism, the main ones being the *Nirvana Sutra*, the *Brahmajala Sutra* and the *Lankavatara Sutra*. It is not easy to date any of these sutras but all of them were probably composed after the 2nd century CE with parts being added in later centuries. Of these sutras the one that most strongly advocates vegetarianism is the *Lankavatara Sutra*. It offers a series of arguments in favor of vegetarianism, some of them sound, others rather puerile, for example, that you will have a bad smell if you eat meat. However, the vehemence with which these arguments are presented suggests that many Buddhists at that time were not vegetarian. You only have to argue vigorously against something when there are others who disagree with you or oppose you. It is also interesting to point out that while the *Nirvana Sutra* condemns meat eating it also says that one is justified in killing people in order to protect monastic property, a weird contradiction of the type still found in the thinking of some strong proponents of vegetarianism.

When the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang (602–664) was in India he made careful and extensive notes on Buddhists' beliefs and practices but makes no mention of them being vegetarian. He noted that people ate meat and that the most important thing was not whether one was vegetarian or not but what kind of meat one ate. Those who ate beef and animals that were considered impure (dogs, monkeys, pigs, donkeys) were considered outcasts. The literature of Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism, dating from after the 7th century CE, often advocates meat eating. Tantric practitioners even offered meat to the various deities they worshipped. It is clear from all this that Indian Buddhists were always in two minds about meat eating.

What about Indian society in general? The evidence shows that from its very beginning Jainism was strongly vegetarian and has been so ever since. There is no evidence that Brahmanism, the main religion during the Buddha's time, taught vegetarianism. Vedic sacrifices in which animals were slaughtered were still being practiced and are frequently mentioned in the Tipitaka (e.g. *Anguttara Nikaya* I,66; II,42; IV,41). However, the *Vinaya* mentions what were called *maghata*, certain days of the month when animals were not slaughtered and meat was not available in the markets (*Vinaya* I,217). The *Jataka* also mentions *maghata* and adds that they would be announced by the beat of a drum (*Jataka* IV,115). Were these non-killing days a result of a general unease about meat eating, or due to the influence of Buddhism, or of Jainism? We don't know. The *Kama Sutra* (3rd cent CE?) points out that alcohol and dog meat increase a man's virility but then adds, somewhat halfheartedly, that a circumspect man would nonetheless take neither. It also gives recipes for aphrodisiacs, many of them including animal flesh and organs. So once again we have an ambiguous attitude towards consuming meat.

Neither of the two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* teach vegetarianism and both often refer to eating meat as if it were normal and uncontroversial, as indeed it was. In his detailed study of everyday life as depicted in the *Ramayana* Ananda Guruge writes, “The Aryans of ancient India were not altogether vegetarians. Their diet was a mixed one; they ate fish as was offered to Bharata and his party by Guha. Meat too was consumed quite widely. Not only did Rama say that animals are killed by men for their flesh but he also killed many animals – deer, wild boar, antelope, etc., - for food during his sojourn in the forest. Meat was eaten with relish and a verse which describes a meal of Rama and Sita states, ‘He sat on a rock tempting Sita with meat (saying) this is pure, this is tasty and this is well cooked by fire.’ In Bharadvaja’s hermitage Bharata’s army was supplied with venison, mutton, pork and flesh of the peacock and the snipe Likewise, Kumbhakarna consumed large quantities of venison, beef and pork and drank blood Although the Vanaras are generally depicted as vegetarians, the Brahmins were actually not. The concept that ‘a purely vegetarian diet is an indication of spiritual progress and an advanced culture’ is a later development in India. Even ascetic Brahmins were not strict vegetarians. Although their usual fare consisted of vegetables, they did not abstain from meat-eating as a principle of either religious or social significance. In fact, Agastya is represented as eating rams and he says, ‘I am able to eat comfortably even one whole ram at a Sraddha ceremony.’ There seems to have been no ban on meat-eating by Brahmins even at the time of Bhavabhuti for his *Uttaramacarita* depicts Vasistha as eating a tawny calf Further, Valin’s statement specifically mentions the animals whose flesh could be eaten by Brahmins. (*The Society of the Ramayana*, 1960, p.147-8).

In the chapter on food the *Sushruta Samhita* (1st– 4th cent CE) recommends all kinds of fish, bird and animal flesh showing that meat eating was commonplace during that period. This and a great deal of other evidence shows that like Buddhists, Hindus were for centuries in two minds about vegetarianism. It was only after the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries that vegetarianism started to become widespread in India.

BUDDHIST ARGUMENTS FOR VEGETARIANISM



So the next question is this – could vegetarianism be implied from or be more consistent with the Buddha’s teachings in general?

The cardinal virtue of Buddhism is respect for life. This is embodied in the first Precept; not to harm living beings. I use the word ‘harm’ rather than ‘kill’ because on many occasions the Buddha mentioned not just abstaining from killing but also from cruelty and violence as pertaining to the Precept. For example, he said that someone is unrighteous (*adhamma*) in body if they “kill living beings, are murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence and without mercy”. (Majjhima Nikaya I,286). It is clear that to kill is to break the first Precept but so is pulling a cat’s tail, flogging a horse or punching someone in the face, although these actions would be less grave than killing. So this is the first point – **(1) Not just killing but also being cruel to living beings is against the first Precept.**

That true adherence to the Precept goes beyond the individual’s direct physical involvement in harming or killing is clear from the Buddha’s instructions that someone who takes the Dhamma seriously should “not kill, encourage (*samadapati*) others to kill, approve of (*samamuñño hoti*) killing, or speak in praise of (*vannam bhasati*) killing” (Anguttara Nikaya V,306). Here the Buddha says very clearly that one should take into account even the indirect and distant implications of one’s actions. So this is the second point – **(2) Trying to influence and encourage others not to harm or kill living beings and to be kind to them would be consistent with the first Precept.**

As is often pointed out, the Precepts have two dimensions, to stop doing wrong (*varitta*) and to actually do good (*caritta*, Majjhima Nikaya III,46). In the case of the first Precept its *varitta* aspect would be avoiding killing and its *caritta* aspect would be doing what one could to nurture, protect and promote life. This is expressed in the Buddha’s full explanation of the Precept when he said, “Avoiding the taking of life, he dwells refraining from taking life. Putting aside the stick and sword he lives with care, kindness and compassion for living beings.” (Digha Nikaya I,4).

Again and again throughout his teachings the Buddha asked us to empathize with others, to feel for them. “Put yourself in the place of others and neither kill nor cause killing.” (Dhammapada 129. “Think, ‘As am I so are others. As are others so am I’ and neither kill nor cause killing.” (Sutta Nipata 705). This then is the third point – **(3) Feeling and acting with kindness and compassion towards living beings would be an integral part of the first Precept.**

The Buddha's teachings of respect for life can be clearly seen in several of his other teachings as well, Right Livelihood (*samma ajiva*) being but one example of this. He gave as examples of wrong means of livelihood the selling (and/or manufacturing?) of weapons, human beings, flesh (*mamsa vanijja*), alcohol and poisons (Anguttara Nikaya III, 208). Although the Buddha does not specifically mention it, it is easy to see that the reason why these livelihoods are unethical is because they involve at some level harming or killing living things. So this is the fourth point – **(4) Not killing or harming living beings and being kind to them, is an integral part of the whole Dhamma, not just the first Precept.**

Another of the Buddha's important teachings is that things do not come into existence randomly or through the will of a divine being but through a specific cause or web of causes. The most well-known example of this is where the Buddha describes the conditions that give rise to suffering (Digha Nikaya II,55). However, there are other examples of dependent arising – the sequence of causes that give rise to enlightenment (Samyutta Nikaya I,29-32) and to social conflict (Sutta Nipata 862-77), etc.

Using this same principle, we can clarify issues related to meat eating. Farmers do not raise cows or chickens for fun; they do it because they can make a living by selling them to the abattoirs. Likewise abattoirs don't slaughter animals for fun, they do it to make a profit. They sell their meat to the processors, who sell it to the local supermarkets or butchers who in turn sell it to the consumers. Any reasonable person would agree that there is a direct and discernible causal link between the farmer or the abattoir and the consumer. It may be a distant link but it is there. Put in its simplest terms, abattoirs would not slaughter animals if people did not purchase meat. So this is the fifth point – **(5) Eating meat is causally related to the harming or killing of living beings and thus is connected to some degree to breaking the first Precept.**

Now let us consider the implications of these five points. Avoiding the complexities of the modern food processing and production industries for the time being, let us look at the simple version of it as it would have existed at the time of the Buddha and how it may still exist in some developing countries and perhaps even in some rural areas in the West. Let's say that during the Buddha's time some monks were invited to the house of a devout family for a meal and that they were served, amongst other things, meat.

In accordance with the Buddha's instructions in the Jivaka Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya II,369) they ate the meat because they had not seen, heard or even suspected that their hosts had gone to someone and specifically asked them to slaughter an animal so that it could be fed to the monks. While eating their meal these monks would have had no bloody intentions, no murderous anger, no perverse fascination in seeing a creature have its throat cut. It is likely that they gave no thought whatsoever to where the meat came from or what was involved in procuring it. From the

narrowest, most literal, strictly direct interpretation of it, the first Precept would not have been broken.

But this narrow perspective raises, at least in my mind, quite a few troubling questions:

(A) Firstly, as we have seen above, all the evidence shows the Buddha wanted the Precept to be interpreted in a broad manner and to have all its implications taken into account.

(B) If the monks did not directly break their rules, maybe the lay people broke the first Precept in that they “encouraged others to kill, approved of killing or spoke in praise of killing” by purchasing the meat.

(C) Maybe the monks *should* have given some thought to the implications and consequences of their actions. Did not the Buddha say, “Before, while doing and after having done a deed one should reflect, ‘Will this action lead to my own or others’ detriment?’” (Majjhima Nikaya I,416).

(D) Although they may not have seen, heard or suspected that an animal was killed specifically for them, the monks must have been aware that it was killed for people who eat meat, and that in eating meat they would fall into this category.

(E) Even if their role in the death of a creature is only indirect and distant, genuine *metta* would urge one not to be involved in killing even to that extent. The Buddha said, “Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, like this one should develop an unbounded mind towards all beings and love to all the world. One should develop an unbounded mind, above, below and across, without obstruction...” (Sutta Nipata 149-50). He also said we should think like this, “I have love for footless creatures. I have love for the two-footed. I have love for the four-footed and I have love for many-footed creatures.” (Anguttara Nikaya II,72). Saying “It wasn’t killed specifically for me and while I ate it my mind was filled with love” does not sound like the deep, kindly and pervasive love the Buddha asked us to develop. Rather, it sounds like a love restricted by rather narrow concerns.

(F) In a very important discourse in the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha praises those who care about others as much as they care about themselves. He says, “There are these four types of people found in the world. What four? He who is concerned with neither his own good nor the good of others, he who is concerned with the good of others but not his own, he who is concerned with his own good but not the good of others and he who is concerned with both his own good and the good of others - and of these four he who is concerned with his own good and the good of others is the chief, the best, the topmost, the highest, the supreme.” (A.II,94). And a little further along the Buddha asks the question, “And how is one concerned with both his own good and the good of others?” In part of the answer to this question he answers, ‘He does not kill or encourage others to kill.’ (A.II,99). We saw before that there is a casual link between killing animals and purchasing their meat. Quite simply, slaughter houses would not slaughter animals and butchers and supermarkets would not stock meat if

people did not buy it. Therefore, when we purchase meat or even eat it when it is served to us, we are encouraging killing, and thus not acting out of concern for others, as the Buddha asked us to do.

The conclusions of all this seems to me to be inescapable – that intelligent, mature Dhamma practice would require vegetarianism, or at least reducing one's meat consumption.

MOTIVATION AND MEAT



Being true to the Dhamma in general and the first Precept in particular, would seem to require being vegetarian. Not everyone sees it this way and most Theravadin and nearly all Vajrayanist Buddhists do not interpret it as being so. We will now examine the motives in practising the Precepts and see how this could be relevant to the meat eating-vegetarian issue.

The Buddha gave three reasons why we should take ethical discipline seriously :

(1) The first is to avoid the negative effects of bad actions – usually called ‘bad kamma’ but more correctly ‘bad *vipaka*’. This is mentioned by the Buddha many times and is the only one of the three that is ever mentioned in traditional Theravada teaching, giving rise, with some justification, to the criticism that Theravada is selfish.

(2) The second reason is because following the Precepts lays the foundation for positive qualities like restraint, awareness, mental clarity, the happiness of having a clear conscience (*anavajja sukha*, Digha Nikaya I,70), etc. and which in time lead to the ultimate good, Nirvana.

(3) And the third reason is love and concern for others. I avoid harming or killing others because I care about their welfare. I don’t steal from them because I respect their property. I don’t sexually exploit or misuse them because I respect their dignity and their right to choose. I do not lie to them because I respect their right to receive and know the truth. And I do not intoxicate myself with alcohol because when I encounter them I want meaningful communication between us. In short, fidelity to the Precepts is as much as anything an act of love, not just to the person I am directly relating to but the wider community.

The Buddha highlighted this point when he said that right actions are a type of consideration or thoughtfulness (*saraniya*) to others that lead to “love, respect, kind regard, harmony and peace”. (*piyakarana garukarana sangahaya avivadaya samaggiya...*, Anguttara Nikaya III,289). Just so that there can be no uncertainty about what the Buddha said here, *piya* = love; *karena* = making, causing; *garu* = respect, esteem; *sangaha*, sympathy, togetherness, mutuality; *avivada* = non-dispute, harmony; *samagga* = peace, concord.

Those who do not accept that eating meat creates negative kamma should have no problems about eating meat. If they feel that they can develop good qualities like patience, determination, mindfulness, generosity, courage and honesty while having a meat diet, again they should have no concern about doing so.

But, anyone who genuinely feels that they should develop an expansive love and kindness towards others - all others (and the Buddha said we should), would have to feel uneasy about being connected in any way to the animals being killed. The knowledge that they are part of a chain that leads to some very nasty things happening (and I do not want to regale you with the horrors of the abattoirs) must make them feel uneasy. It would have to motivate a thoughtful Buddhist to try to do at least something about this cruelty; and the least one could do is not be a link in the chain, by abstaining from eating meat.

THE LAST LINK IN THE CHAIN



Here is a quandary for you. We saw before that a causal link can be discerned between eating meat and animals being killed. Nowadays there are many persons between these two points - the slaughter man, the meat packers, the distributors, etc. but in either its simplest or its most complex form the three key participants are (1) the slaughter man, the one who actually draws the knife across the animals throat; (2) the middleman who sells the meat and (3) the customer, the person who buys and consumes the meat. The existence of these three depends on each other.

Now it is obvious why the Buddha mentioned slaughter men, hunters, deer stalkers, fishermen, executioners, etc. as those who do not practice Dhamma (Samyutta Nikaya II,256). It is also clear enough why he described people who sell meat as failing to practice Right Livelihood (Anguttara Nikaya III,208). But interestingly, nowhere does the Buddha complete what seems to be the logical sequence by mentioning the third and last link in the chain, the buyer/eater. Why is this? If killing an animal is wrong and selling its meat is wrong, why isn't buying meat wrong too?

Here is another quandary for you. The Buddha said that his lay disciples should avoid making their living by five trades (*vanijja*); these being trade in weapons (*sattha*), in human beings (*satta*), in meat (*mamsa*), in alcohol (*majja*) and in poisons (*visa*, Anguttara Nikaya III.208). Although this seems clear enough, looking at it a little more carefully might reveal something relevant to the question of meat eating. Why are these trades wrong, unwholesome or kammically negative? Let's have a look at arms dealing. While the blacksmith is forging steel to make a sword he is unlikely to have any evil intentions, he is probably preoccupied with forging his steel and he certainly does not kill anyone. The arms dealer who sells the sword does not kill anyone either. He's just selling a commodity.

So why did the Buddha consider arms trading to be a wrong means of livelihood? Obviously because weapons, like poisons make killing possible. Their main purpose, indeed their only purpose, is to kill. The arms dealer is centrally situated in a chain that could lead to someone being killed, even though he himself does not kill anyone. A, arms manufacturer - B, arms dealer = C, purchaser and killing. Now if we reverse this sequence and apply it to meat eating then surely the same conclusion would have to be drawn; C - eating meat - B, meat seller = A, slaughter man and killing. Why in both these cases has the Buddha left out one or two of the key links in these chains?

THE PROBLEMATIC VEGETARIAN



One of the reasons why I only recently became vegetarian (and even now not 100% so) is the hypocrisy and inconsistency I observed amongst quiet a few vegetarians. The awareness of this and the resistance it caused prevented me from seeing intelligent, thoughtful vegetarianism's consistency with the Dhamma. Arthur Koestler once described something as being "as dull as dining with a vegetarian" and I know exactly what he meant. Listening to vegetarians talk often gives one the impression that they are more concerned about mastication, digestive juices and bowel movements than they are about the lives of innocent animals.

In 1996 when I visited Hong Kong and Taiwan I stayed in many Chinese Mahayana monasteries. I was always welcomed with the greatest courtesy but inevitably the subject of diet would come up. As is fairly typical of vegetarians, many of my hosts were fixated on food and about the only thing they knew about Theravada was that Theravadins will eat meat. When I was asked, and sooner or later I always was, "Are you vegetarian?" I would truthfully reply, "No I am not. But while here (Hong Kong or Taiwan) I am adhering to your discipline." This answer was often followed by a long, usually polite but sometimes reproachful, lecture about how uncompassionate it is to eat meat.

While fingers were being wagged in my face I couldn't help noticing that nearly all my hosts were dressed in silk robes and I happen to know that approximately 50 silk worms have to be boiled alive to make one square inch of silk. I also noticed that all the banners, hangings, etc. in the monasteries' shrines were likewise of silk. One monk delivered his lecture to me while sitting on what could only be described as a throne, flanked by two of the biggest elephant tusks I have ever seen, each intricately and exquisitely carved with images of Kuan Yin and other bodhisattvas. Both these tusks were still creamy-white indicating that their original owner had only been slaughtered (probably illegally) a few years ago.

Another thing I noticed was the furniture. You may know that running down the eastern side of Taiwan is a chain of very high mountains and that these are covered with thick forest made up of the most magnificent ancient trees. What you probably don't know is that it has become the fashion in Taiwan to have furniture made out of these trees. A table may consist of a huge cross-section of a trunk a foot or more thick and the five or six chairs around it can be made out of cross-sections of smaller trunks or large branches. The attraction of this type of furniture is the often gnarled outer surface of the trunk slabs and the age-rings within them. I hardly need mention that this furniture is extremely expensive but as Taiwanese temples tend to be very, very, opulent, they usually have at least one or two sets of this furniture.

One incredibly lavish monastery I visited had five such sets in the visitor's hall and one in the vestibule of each monk's room. Another must-have I noticed in many temples is huge, twisted, gnarled tree trunks, sometimes including the roots, with Bodhidharma, Kuan Yin or lohans carved into them. None of the gung-ho vegetarian monks I met seemed particularly concerned about their role in decimating Taiwan's ancient forests by having these beautiful but completely unnecessary and destructive luxuries. It seemed to be that eating meat was unforgivable but stripping the forests of their trees and having silk worms boiled alive was okay.

But by far the worst thing I saw in Taiwan was the attitude towards pets. The Taiwanese are busy absorbing Western middle-class values and tastes but like all newcomers they still haven't got it quite right. So, for example, everyone wants a fluffy adorable puppy, kitten or bunny but they are not yet schooled in what to do with them once they get them. Three months later or when the animal has grown up and is no longer cute, they lose interest in it. This is particularly true of dogs who are often confined in tiny cages. Some of these caged dogs are put at front gates of peoples' homes so they will bark when anyone comes. I recall looking down several streets and seeing one of these tiny cages at nearly every gate and hearing their occupants howling with boredom, barking incessantly and whimpering for attention.

As in Taiwanese homes, so too in Taiwanese monasteries. In one monastery I saw two adult Alsatians locked in a cage barely big enough for them to turn around and in the three weeks I was at this place they were never let out once. Worse still, the abbot of this temple, a rather formidable man, was well-known as an outspoken and crusading advocate of, you guessed it, strict vegetarianism - no milk, no eggs, no animal products at all. Both his Alsatians suffered from severe rickets because being a vegan himself the abbot had imposed his fetish on his dogs when they were puppies by refusing to feed them milk or meat and thus causing their legs to be all bowed and bent. Having said all this I should point out that generally I was impressed by the vigor of Buddhism in Taiwan and that the country has an active animal rights movement. My problem was only with the way some Taiwanese Buddhist practiced vegetarianism.

I'd have to say that some other vegetarians I have encountered suffer from a similar lopsidedness - a near obsession with meat and its consumption and virtually no interest in any other kind of cruelty to animals or a carelessness towards the environment in which they live. For many people, just not eating meat is enough - and from a Buddhist perspective it is not enough. You could be a scrupulous vegetarian and at the same time be thoughtless, unkind and uncaring about other beings. Vegetarianism is good, but if it does not go hand in hand with a compassionate regard for all human and animal life it's just another food fad. So if you are going to be a vegetarian be an intelligent one.

MEAT IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION



Now I would like to examine different Buddhist attitudes to vegetarianism. The simplistic picture - Hinayanists (Theravadins) eat meat and Mahayanists don't - does not reflect reality. Although the Theravada interpretation of the Pali Tipitaka does not require vegetarianism, many Sri Lankans do not eat meat. Many will eat fish but not meat and many others will shun beef while eating other types of meat. Vegetarianism is uncommon in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Some Mahayana texts advocate vegetarianism, although only a few, and all Chinese and Korean monks and nuns and the more devout lay people are usually strictly vegetarian. Many other Chinese and Korean lay people will be vegetarian at least on certain holy days. Vajrayana texts do not advocate abstaining from meat, indeed some specifically endorse and even encourage it. Vegetarianism is rare in Bhutan, Tibet, Mongolia and also in Japan.

There are three Theravadin justifications for eating meat. We have already discussed the "I didn't see, hear or suspect that the animal was killed for me so I'm off the hook" argument. The next common justification for meat eating, that it does not create negative kamma, is indicative of Theravada's tendency towards narrowness and self-absorption. I do not mean this comment to be sarcastic. I am just pointing out a fact. In a survey I did of 16 Theravadin books and articles on vegetarianism or sections from Theravadin books discussing the subject, this was the only argument used - that the person who eats the meat, does not create any bad kamma for himself or herself.

In fact, I have yet to find any Theravadin discourse on the vegetarian/meat eating debate which includes some discussion the effect that eating meat has on other beings, i.e. the animals being killed. The archetypal Theravadin is like the man who walks past someone whose life is in mortal danger without helping them. When asked why he didn't help he says, "There is no penalty for not helping. So why should I?" In Theravada loving concern for others as described in the Metta Sutta and elsewhere, is too often left out of the equation. Perhaps too much of the focus is on the self.

The other common justification for meat eating goes like this. "Monks get what they need by begging and should eat whatever they are given without picking and choosing." Like quite a few other claims of Theravada, this explanation of the theory bears little resemblance to the reality. The reality is, and I'm probably revealing an insider's secret here, that monks nearly always get exactly what they want. When the average monk wants something he simply buys it or when one of his supporters

asks him what he needs he replies, "I need A, B and C." The more scrupulous monks will resort to hints, a slightly changed expression or insinuations. Either way, lay people are more than happy to provide monks with all their needs and most of their wants as well, and if a monk wanted a vegetarian diet he would get it without any difficulty at all.

Another weakness in this argument is that it only relates to a tiny percentage of all Theravadins, i.e. monks. All too often Theravada discourse focuses on issues that are relevant to or are the concern of monks, leaving out the other 98% of people. What about lay people to whom neither this argument or the "I didn't see, hear or suspect" argument would be relevant? They don't go begging and they are free to make choices about what they eat! Why can't they be encouraged to be vegetarian? And if they were vegetarian they would offer vegetarian food to monks.

Recently a slightly more sophisticated argument has been used to justify meat eating in Theravada. The argument goes like this. "Whether or not you eat meat, animals will be killed, to clear forests for agricultural land, by spraying crops to protect them from insect pests, by damming rivers to generate electricity and by many other ways. Even when we drive our car insects are squashed against the windscreen and larger animals are killed as we drive past." (Dhammavuddha Thera, *The Buddha's View on Meat Eating*, 2008). All this is undoubtedly true.

However, such an argument embodies a narrow, disengaged and one-dimensional perspective rather typical of much Theravadin thinking. It is equivalent to saying, "People are going to die of cancer anyway so why bother discouraging smoking? People are going to be killed in accidents no matter what you do so why bother enacting safety regulations? Even though we have serious punishments for murder people still kill each other so what's the point in criminalizing murder?"

Even though a civilized humane society knows there will always be deaths from cancer, accidents, murder and other causes, it still feels it worthwhile to try to minimize such deaths. Can it regulate or protect its citizens from every possible life-threatening situation? No! But where it is feasible it does so and it does save many lives as a result. Will being vegetarian stop animals being killed? No! But it is one step I can take, a very simple step, a step that costs me nothing, which will diminish at least some of the great suffering in the world and my complicity in it.

Vajrayana (I will use the term Tibetan Buddhism from now on) is another matter. Most Tibetan Buddhists - living Buddhas, manifestations of Manjusri, *rimpoches* and *tulkus* included, don't just eat meat, they consume it with gusto. When I read works on Tibetan Buddhism I find the subject of compassion is nearly always mentioned somewhere; and so it should be. As if to emphasize its central position in Tibetan Buddhism, it is usually referred to not just as compassion but as 'great compassion' (*maha karuna*).

Numerous ancient and modern commentaries on the Bodhicariyavatara linger with tear jerking emotion on Santideva's aspiration to willingly give his life for others. The practice of "exchanging self with others" (*paratma parivartana*) forms an important element within the practices of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. I won't labor the point because I think you can see where this is going. Is there not a serious contradiction between the Tibetan Buddhist strong and persistent emphasis on compassion and the fact that they eat meat? I think there is. So Tibetan Buddhism may not be narrow and self-centered but it could be argued that it is hypocritical and inconsistent concerning meat eating.

Some years ago when I was staying at Bodh Gaya, the Dalai Lama was due in a few days to give some talks and the town was filling up with Tibetans. A friend and I decided to get out of town for the duration to avoid the crowds. As we drove to Gaya we found the road blocked by a herd of a hundred or so buffaloes and goats being driven forward by several cowherds. Our driver hooted the horn, inched the car through the animals and when we got to one of the cowherds asked him where he was going with such a large number of animals. "To Bodh Gaya. They're for the lamas," he replied. One would think that the least they could do is abstain from meat while they are at such a sacred place receiving teachings that almost certainly included calls to have *maha karuna* for all beings. But no. The *rimpoches* must have their meat.

Related to all this is a rather shameful hypocrisy that prevailed and indeed continues to linger in nearly all Buddhist lands, whether they be Theravada, Mahayana or Tibetan Buddhist. Butchers, leather-workers, hunters, fishermen and fowlers in Buddhist countries provided the community with various animal products including meat but were marginalized for doing so. Coastal-living fishermen in Sri Lanka were shunned by the majority and no monks ministered to their spiritual needs because they killed fish. Consequently these people were easily converted to Catholicism when the Portuguese arrived.

Interestingly, soldiers, whose job was to kill humans, were never similarly ostracized. In Japan the *burakumin* were and still are treated as outcasts because they did slaughtering and other 'unclean' tasks. In Tibet a group of people called the *ragyapa* were likewise despised because they made their living as slaughter men and tanners and were relegated to the outskirts of towns where they lived in the most miserable conditions. I will stand being corrected here but I think *ragyapa* were not even allowed into temples. Even coracle men were likewise despised because their crafts were made of leather. Heinrich Harrer has some interesting comments on how the monastic hierarchy made these peoples' lives difficult while benefiting from their services.

Pious Burmese would never slaughter a large animal (cow or buffalo) but they think that killing small ones like fish, ducks or chickens is okay or that it only creates a manageable amount of negative *vipaka*. But they are happy to let the Muslims provide them with their beef and mutton and despise them for doing so. So it

would seem that meat eating is an issue that all Buddhist schools are yet to intelligently, consistently and compassionately come to terms with.

HOW I BECAME A VEGETARIAN



It was a Saturday morning and I was in Phnom Penh walking through the central market looking for some fruit to buy. I unknowingly soon found myself in the meat section. Even a blind person would know they were there. The stench was overpowering. Chickens with wet feathers and blank expressions sat in tiny cages, probably oblivious to what was soon to happen to them. The goats certainly knew. You could see it in their eyes. But there was nothing they could do and they just stood there, heads bowed, resigned to their fate. Meat hung on hooks, knives and cleavers lay on chopping blocks and everything was covered with blood and flies. For a non-human animal it would be a vision of hell.

I walked on hoping to get to the fruit and vegetable section and a few minutes later found my way blocked by a large round basket that was placed right in the middle of the aisle. The basket was full of dead and plucked chickens and a man was crouching beside the basket doing something to the chickens with a hose while a young boy stood on the other side doing something with what looked like a gas cylinder. I stood there for a moment trying to take in the scene before me.

Then it dawned on me. The chickens were slightly putrid, in places their yellowish-white skin was going green or gray and the stench of decay wafted up into my nostrils. The man was sticking a needle attached to the hose into each chicken and as he did so the boy pumped the cylinder. In countries like Cambodia, when a butcher's or fish monger's wares have gone off, it is sometimes pumped full of formalin to disguise the putrefaction so it can continue to be sold. Of course this is illegal but in such countries the enforcement of health regulations are rather lax.

The association in my mind of food, the chicken, and the formalin, which as you probably know is used by undertakers to preserve human cadavers, revolted me so much that I turned away and actually vomited. A man behind one of the stalls saw this and most kindly offered me a glass of water so I could wash my mouth out. When I got back to the temple I was still feeling a bit nauseous but not so much that I could not eat and when the lunch bell rang I made my way to the dining hall.

As I sat at the table with all the dishes of food on it I immediately noticed that the main dish was, you guessed it, chicken. As soon as I saw it my stomach began to churn again and I had to rush from the hall. I didn't vomit this time but my appetite had quite gone. Over the next few weeks my taste for meat, any meat, just went. It slowly returned but if the memory of the putrid formalin-dosed chickens was aroused I had to consciously suppress it or lose my appetite.

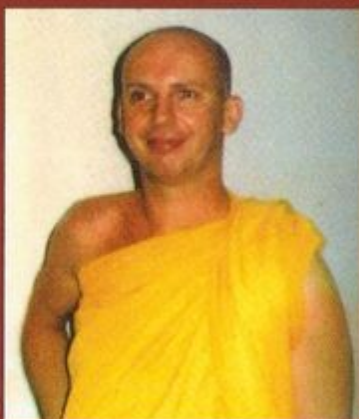
Three months later, on a quick trip to Australia, a Sri Lankan friend gave me some things to deliver to his brother back in Sri Lanka. One of these things was a book called *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer.* I had never heard of this book and its title aroused no interest in me. Back in Sri Lanka I called the brother and he said he would come the next day to collect the things. However, he didn't show up for another three months. The book and other things sat around my room acting as a sort of silent reminder of how casual Sinhalese can be towards keeping appointments.

One hot afternoon as I lay on my bed feeling rather bored and with nothing to read, I picked Singer's book up thinking to just browse through it. As it happened, the parts I read interested me so much that I returned to the beginning and read the whole thing in three sittings. I had been expecting it to take the usual vegetarian's approach, calling meat 'carriion' or 'rotten flesh,' quoting the opinions of famous odd-ball vegetarians, giving long descriptions of how meat ferments in the bowels and claiming that a vegetarians' poo smells better than a meat eaters' poo. Instead, Singer argues for the kind treatment of animals (including not eating them) soberly, objectively, logically and convincingly. Peter Singer is a professional philosopher and he writes like one. And incidentally, he has nothing to do with the extremist animal rights group Animal Liberation.

As I followed his arguments I found myself forced by the logic of them to agree with him. Over the next week or two I returned to parts of the book and reread them and finally decided that anyone who wants *metta* and *karuna* to be a more important part of their character would have to seriously consider being vegetarian. As a Buddhist I do wish to have *metta* and *karuna* dominant in my life and so I made the decision to abstain from eating meat.

Since that time I have cut my meat consumption by at least 95%. The force of long established habit, circumstance or just the desire for a juicy steak accounting for the other 5%. So my decision to become vegetarian was brought about by three things - a gradual awareness of the need for active and engaged (as opposed to passive) *metta* in the Buddhist life, by an incident of visceral revulsion with meat, and then by the reasoning of a philosopher helping me see the implications in the Buddha's words that I had not seen before. I could not honestly say that I am grateful to that Cambodian man with his putrefying chickens, but I am most grateful to Peter Singer.

* The book has recently been re-issued as *Animal Liberation - The Definitive Classic of the Animal Liberation Movement*, Harper 2009.



An issue that has long divided Buddhists is whether or not meat-eating is consistent with the Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha. Both ancient and modern scholars have debated this matter, sometimes with considerable rankor. In this small book, Bhante Dhammika, a well-known Buddhist monk and writer, revisits the various arguments for and against meat-eating and examines them from a very different perspective. In doing so he also dispels several common misconceptions about Buddhism, highlights some rarely discussed problems associated with being vegetarian and details some of the good reasons for becoming one. This book will make you look at Buddhism very differently. It might make you look at your next meal very differently too.

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